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Book Review

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Book Review

Abstract

Hena Maes-Jelinek, ed., *Wilson Harris: The Uncompromising Imagination* (Dangaroo Press, 1991) and Alan Riach and Mark Williams, eds., *The Radical Imagination: Lectures & Talk* (University of Liege, 1992).

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Hena Maes-Jelinek, ed., *Wilson Harris: The Uncompromising Imagination* (Dangaroo Press, 1991) and Alan Riach and Mark Williams, eds., *The Radical Imagination: Lectures & Talk* (University of Liège, 1992).

Wilson Harris: The Uncompromising Imagination is edited by Hena Maes-Jelinek who contributes the final critical dialogue of this book which was published in 1991. Alan Riach and Mark Williams, editors of *The Radical Imagination* (1992), have put together four recent talks (1989-1991) and a 1990 interview of Harris. In many ways these two books are complementary. *The Uncompromising Imagination* is a celebratory volume. A tribute to Harris's seventieth birthday, the material in this volume illustrates the uniqueness of the novelist's career. As a critic of society, Harris's probing explorations into the transcultural roots of our society make his insightful talks in *The Radical Imagination* an indispensable corollary to his novels.

In *The Uncompromising Imagination*, the power of Harris's vision and the effect of his transcultural philosophy are seen in the five poems written for the occasion. The affective discourse his imagery, symbology, and imaginative language uncover is displayed in three conversation pieces. And the demanding dialogue he initiates is illustrated in nineteen critical essays on his work. *The Radical Imagination* made up of five talks delivered at the University of Cambridge and an interview done at Harris's home in Chelmsford, England, offers Harris's own critical appraisals. These talks present the thrust of Harris's religious, philosophical, political and artistic stance in his own voice and are illustrated through discussions of his own novels.

Harris's cultural criticism has deepened and clarified itself over the years. Yet he continues to explore in the latest novel of his trilogy, *The Four Banks of the River of Space* (1990), what he began in the first novel of the Guyana Quartet, *Palace of the Peacock*. These three important elements are his concern with the paradoxical; a belief in the power of the intuitive imagination, and the significance underlying the partiality of identity. *The Uncompromising Imagination* consists of poems, conversation pieces, critical dialogues and an updated Harris bibliography. Of the ten poems, three were written by the novelist's dramatist/poet wife, Margaret Harris; one each by the poet/scholars Kathleen Raine, David Dabydeen and Michael Thorpe; and a sequence of four poems by Fred D'Aguiar. The mystery of the bone flute of Amerindian lore and Harris's well-known story of pushing a childhood friend into the Guyana trench figure importantly in these poems.

The first of the three conversation pieces by Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford co-editors of *Enigma of Values* is entitled, 'Intimations of the Stranger'. It probes into the 'revisionary capacity' that resides in the act of writing, since the 'strangers within oneself' seem to have their own agenda and uncover connections unknown to the writer. Michael Gilkes's 'The Landscape of Dreams' explores the Harrisian perception that vanished languages and peoples carry on a dialogue with the living making links with forgotten resources. Michel Fabre's piece made up of a letter addressed to Harris, and an 'Abridged Proust Questionnaire' (1979) also includes extracts from correspondence received from Harris. The themes introduced in this strange conversation are manifold: the unfathomable depths of the imagination; the interplay

among cultures; the legacies of violence, conquest and rape; the language of eclipsed and living experiences; the dredging operation of legends, myths and rituals; the literary inheritance/heritage of antecedent cultures.

The critical dialogues occupy the largest section (84 pages) of the volume, and come after eight pages of photographs. A stellar performance by critics who, for the most part, eschew the tortuous language and debate of much postmodern criticism, these essays address a variety of concerns. Mark Williams and Alan Riach speak of the increasing reputation and recognition of Harris even as he continues to challenge readers. Gareth Griffiths stresses the centrality of Harris in Caribbean literature. Like Brathwaite Harris rejected the tyrannical hold of the past, a position which Stephen Slemmon supports. In contrast to the convoluted language of the Slemmon essay the writing of Joyce Sparer Adler is accessible. She draws comparisons between Harris and Melville and sees both as coming at pivotal points of intersection in which the old tradition is challenged by a new.

Russell McDougall's analysis of the Yurokon myth as a means of joining music (scale) with body (flesh) in *Palace of the Peacock* like Gregory Shaw's interpretation of the meeting of the Aztec myth of Quetzalcoatl with the Christian myth of Christ in *The Whole Armour* underscores the kinds of resonance that are set up in Harris's fiction. The African, Greek, and European resonances are dealt with by Nathaniel Mackey in his analysis of *The Secret Ladder*. The Harris Achebe Conrad debate is explored by Helen Tiffin while Louis James reads *Tumatumari* as an invitation to share a 'constant transformation of levels of consciousness.'

Harris's comic vision is pursued by Mark A. McWatt in *Black Marsden*, while Alan Riach explores the meeting of the realistic and the fantastic/grotesque in the same novel. Mary Lou Emery's incomplete conversation with Harris poses an interesting and creative exegesis on his work while William J. Howard explores the revisionary philosophy and the beginning of a simplifying process which he sees as beginning with *DaSilva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness*. Al Creighton extends this line of analysis in his discussion of *Carnival* and *The Infinite Rehearsal* as he explores Harris's reworking of themes and metaphor in his concern with the eternal cyclic existence of humankind.

The sustaining of Harris's vision through an uncompromising imagination is Desmond Hamlet's thesis, while Jean Pierre Durix tackles Harris's exploring of the nature of the creative act which has a modifying effect on the author in the process of creation. Michael N. Jagessar's theological perspective explored in his discussion of *The Infinite Rehearsal* makes the point that language should be deconstructed to express a genuinely interdependent relation between God and the world, and that such a search could lead to interpreting the word of God through a relating of the past with the present. The volume concludes with Maes-Jelinek's dialogue with the Harrisian imagination in *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, third novel of the trilogy where the novelist envisions the kind of epic Odyssey suitable for today's transcultural society.

In Harris's 1989 lecture at the University of Cambridge, 'Judgement and Dream' in *The Radical Imagination*, he speaks about the viability of myth and the creative expression of these myths in his own novels. His August 1990 'Interview' discusses the importance of mixed backgrounds in a writer; through the interweaving of the wealth of these backgrounds, many partial images, difficult for the Eurocentric world to accept, come into play. The four Smuts Memorial Fund Commonwealth lectures explore the present cultural crisis by examining several facets of the crisis. 'Imagery, Language and the Intuitive Imagination' are discussed to reveal the cloths, threads or masks that hide linkages of the present with the past. The second essay, 'The Absent Presence: The Caribbean and South America' moves further into the question of the difference between realistic immediacy and quantum immediacy. 'Unfinished Genesis: A Personal View of Cross-Cultural Tradition' returns to the themes of the ongoing discovery of

links with the cultural past. Harris searches for 'Creative and Re-creative Balance Between Diverse Culture' in his fourth lecture. His 1991 Liege Lecture, 'Originality and Tradition' explores the links the author critic discovers between tragedy, allegory and the law, links he saw implicit in *Carnival*.

In their important collection of Harris's thinking, Riach and Williams have succeeded in steering a course between the art of literal orature – Harris's talks – and that of the formal lecture. Harris's wrestling with his riddling ideas is captured as his mind moves forward then backward then ahead again. Synergized by the passion of their experience, the Harrisian character as critics and readers seen in the Maes-Jelinek volume are all engaged in an alchemical process. Harris's most daring intuitions and perceptions challenge us all to deepen our insight into the ills of our culture. As he probes into the nature of knowledge itself and into the static mindset created by our thinking and our institutions, this extraordinary intellect engages in building bridges between diverse cultures.

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